Utilitarianism

An Overview

The Basic Idea

- Utilitarianism's goal is easy to state:

  "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (a.k.a. **Greatest Happiness Principle** or **GHP**)
- The quote is from Francis Hutcheson, a Scottish Enlightenment figure (*Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, 1725).
- The *idea* of maximizing aggregate welfare may be a simple one, but (as in so many other cases) ***the devil is in the details***. *(Happiness? Number of what? Two maximands? etc.)*
- I will proceed by listing the great utilitarians, past and present, discussing the theories of Bentham & Sidgwick (the

The Great Utilitarians

Ancient World

- Aristippus of Cyrene 5th/4th c. BC Greek; Cyrenaics; hedonist
- Epicurus 4th/3rd c. BC Greek; Epicureans; ascetic pain-minimizer
- Lucretius 1st c. BC Roman; poet and disciple of Epicurus

Modern World (also: Hutcheson himself, Francis Edgeworth, etc.)

- Claude Helvétius 18th c. French; major influence on Bentham and Mill
- **Jeremy Bentham** (1748-1832) British
- James Mill (1773-1836) British; disciple of Bentham
- **John Stuart Mill*** (1806-1873) British; son of James Mill; *Autobiography*
- **Henry Sidgwick** (1838-1900) British

20th Century

- **J.J.C. Smart** *Utilitarianism: For & Against* (with Bernard Williams)
- R.M. Hare ethical duty to procreate; rule-utilitarianism
- John Harsanyi Nobel Laureate in Economics (game theory)
- **Peter Singer** animal rights; euthanasia; drowning-child

Jeremy Bentham

Amusing Anecdotes

1. The Panopticon (a model prison of novel design): its failure to receive funding from Parliament in part motivated his desire for electoral reform.
2. Two of his disciples (James Mill and John Austin) moved to London with their families to be near him, and the Mills even vacationed with him for six months each year—he was essentially a cult leader.
3. His corpse—as he requested—is still on display at University College, London. (His head, having since fallen off, sits on a platter at his feet—or used to.)
4. He took the idea of a “felicific calculus” to its mildly absurd conclusion.

Bentham was inspired by Hutcheson’s quote and by the works of Helvétius, Priestley, &

Bentham's *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789)*

- **Chapter 1 (Of the Principle of Utility):** The GHP is to be the *standard **and** motive* for *every action* of *every individual*, whether in private life or in government service.
- "The interest of the community then is, what?—the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it."
- A simple aggregative principle:

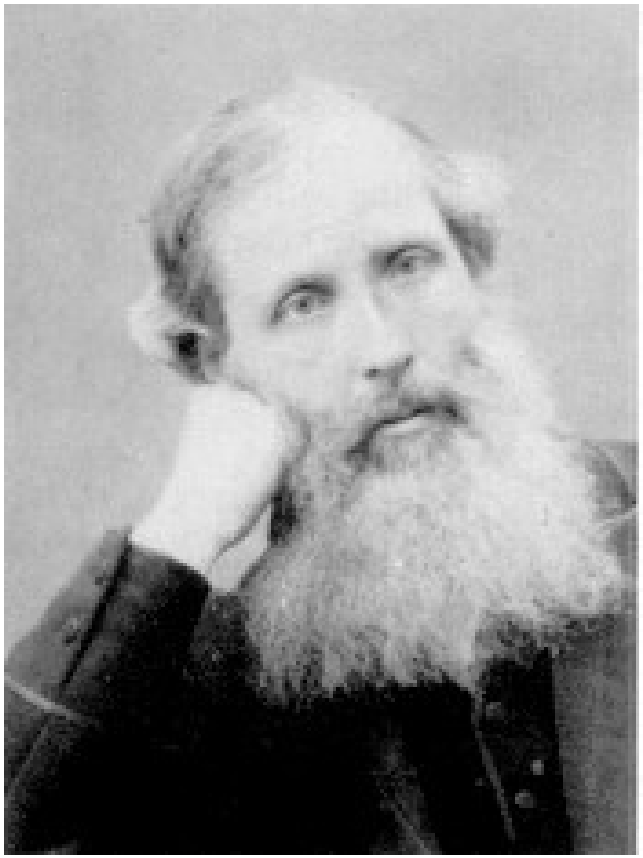
-continued-

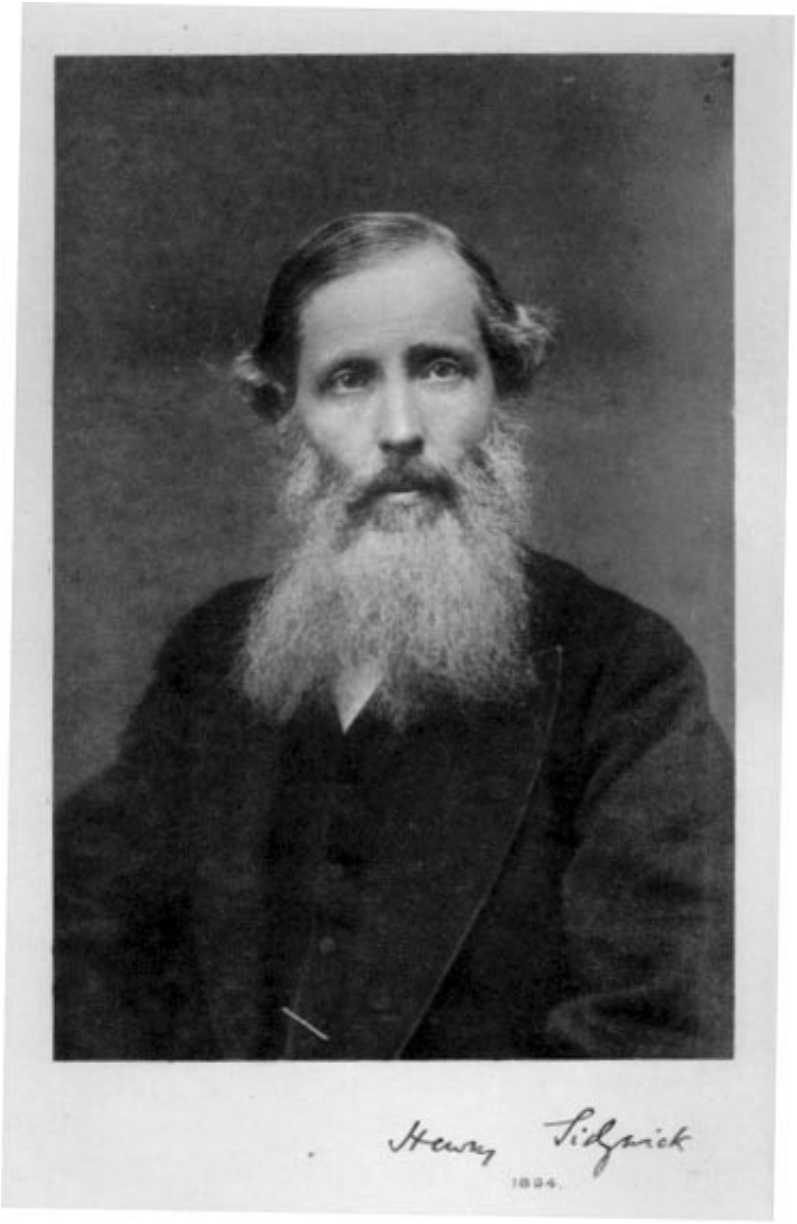
- **Chapter 4 (Value of a *Lot* of Pleasure or Pain, How to be Measured):** Pleasures and pains vary along *seven* dimensions: (1) intensity, (2) duration, (3) certainty, (4) propinquity (“speedy”), (5) fecundity (“fruitful”), (6) purity, and (7) extent. He even created a jaunty little poem as a mnemonic device:

Intense, long, certain, speedy, fruitful, pure
—
Such marks in *pleasures* and in *pains* endure.
Such pleasures seek if *private* be thy end:
If it be *public*, wide let them *extend*.
Such *pains* avoid, whichever be thy view:

Henry Sidgwick

- Sidgwick taught moral philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge, from 1869 until 1900.
- He was a strong supporter of women's rights, helping to found Newnham College, Cambridge, for women.
- *The Methods of Ethics* (1874; 7th ed. 1907) was his *magnum opus*. It presents, critiques, but ultimately defends classical-utilitarian doctrine and is noteworthy for at least *two* reasons:
  1. It recognizes the *weaknesses* of utilitarian doctrine and attempts to correct them consistently with the doctrine's central tenets, &
  2. It attempts a comparative study of three moral conceptions (*intuitionism*, *egoistic hedonism*, and *universalistic hedonism* [utilitarianism]) and finds that universalistic hedonism is superior to (though broadly consistent with) intuitionism but that it *cannot* be shown to be superior to egoistic hedonism. (Cf. John Rawls's




Henry Sidgwick
1894.

Direct vs. Indirect Utilitarianism

- Distinction between GHP as *standard* ***& motive*** (direct) v. merely the ***ultimate*** *standard* (indirect).
- To quote Sidgwick, "**if** experience shows that the general happiness will be more satisfactorily attained if men frequently act from *other* motives than pure universal philanthropy, it is obvious that these other motives are reasonably to be preferred on Utilitarian principles."
- *Classic example:* Adam Smith and the "invisible hand" leading *self*-interest in economic matters

Direct: *Act vs. Rule Utilitarianism*

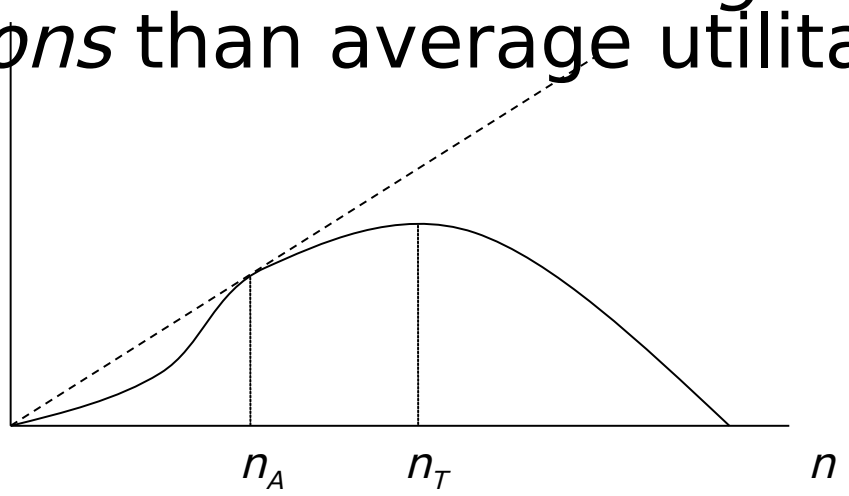
- *Act utilitarianism:* choose *acts* in order to maximize happiness.
- *Rule utilitarianism:* choose *rules* to maximize happiness (e.g., against theft, assault, murder; for charity); choose acts that follow those rules.
- What if an act would (1) break a rule but (2) still maximize happiness? Shouldn't we then break the rule on *utilitarian* grounds? (e.g., food theft)
- *Answer:* rule utilitarianism just act utilitarianism *subject to information constraints* (explain); as those constraints are relaxed, the former just collapses into the latter. So, yes: all utilitarian rules just "rules of thumb," to be broken when

Hedonistic vs. Nonhedonistic Utilitarianism

- **Hedonistic:** involves the following set of claims:
  1. happiness is just a matter of *pleasure* and *pain;*
  2. all pleasures and pains are *homogeneous* (both [α] *across activities* and [β] *across people*: "pushpin's as good as poetry," your pleasure's just like my pleasure, etc.: *comparability*);
  3. consequently, they can be treated as *inputs* in a *felicific calculus.* {recall simple aggregative principle}
- **Nonhedonistic:** rejects one or more of these claims. ***Mill*** rejects 2α: fewer cultivated pleasures (e.g., intellectual ones) *cannot* be compensated by more bestial ones; ***economists*** reject* 1.

Total vs. Average Utilitarianism

- What is the proper maximand?
  1. Total utility:
  2. Average utility:
- If the population is fixed, the two will offer the same prescriptions; otherwise not.
- Under a set of reasonable assumptions about utility, total (classical) utilitarianism will lead to *larger populations* than average utilitarianism.



Exoteric vs. Esoteric Utilitarianism

- The utilitarianism we have been discussing so far is *exoteric* (publicly knowable *and* known), whether GHP is both the standard *and the motive* for action (direct) or merely the *ultimate* standard (indirect).
- However, it could also be *esoteric* (hidden or secret). To quote Sidgwick: "a Utilitarian **may** reasonably desire, on Utilitarian principles, that some of his conclusions should be rejected by mankind generally [especially in the case where *exceptions* to rules are necessary, e.g., rebellion]; or even that the vulgar should keep aloof from his system as a whole, in so far as the inevitable indefiniteness and complexity of its calculations render it likely to lead to bad results in their hands." *(**also:** connection to indirectness)*
- Cf. the "noble lies" of Plato's *Republic:* the Myth of

Other Issues

1. *Weighting Utilities:* Bentham, Mill, & Sidgwick are all for counting everyone's utilities equally (no weighting)—all "utils" created equal.
2. *"Animal rights":* Bentham, Mill, & Sidgwick all supported protections for animals—after all, they can feel pleasure and pain, just like us. (Cf. Peter Singer)
3. *Political implications:* exoteric, direct, act utilitarianism *tends* to be politically radical (e.g., Bentham and Singer), whereas more indirect &/or esoteric versions are politically ambiguous (e.g., Mill vs. Sidgwick).